United Nations A/AC.198/2000/3

General Assembly

Distr.: General
6 March 2000

Original: English

Committee on Information
Twenty-second session
1-12 May 2000
Substantive questions

Integration of United Nations information centres with field offices of the United Nations Development Programme: a case-by-case review

Report of the Secretary-General

I. Introduction

1. In 1992, an initiative was launched to integrate the operations of certain United Nations information centres with field offices of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Following an evaluation of the integration exercise, the Secretary-General concluded in his report to the Committee on Information that he intended "to continue the experience, whenever feasible, in accordance with his stated objectives: to present a unified image of the United Nations in the field; to enhance information activities in all areas, including development issues; and to achieve possible economies through sharing of common services".[1]

2. The General Assembly, in its resolution 51/138 B of 13 December 1996, recommended the continuation of the integration exercise in a cost-effective manner and, whenever feasible, on a case-by-case basis, taking into account the views of the host country and ensuring that the information functions and the autonomy of United Nations information centres are not adversely affected.

3. In 1997, the Secretary-General's Task Force on the Reorientation of United Nations Public Information Activities recognized that the experience of integrating information centres with United Nations offices under a resident coordinator had "not been uniformly productive".[2] This observation was noted by the General Assembly, which, in resolution 53/59 B of 3 December 1998, requested the Secretary-General to take into account the substantial problems that some integrated information centres had encountered in performing their information and communications functions. In an initial assessment of the activities of the global network of United Nations information centres, the Secretary-General found that, in general, the integrated information centres had a lower level of programme delivery and a narrower range of activities than those which had not been integrated and that the frequency of reporting on activities was often weaker.[3] The report of the Secretary-General also noted that part of the difficulties faced by integrated information centres was the diminished availability of resources, particularly staff.

4. In resolution 54/82 B of 6 December 1999, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to carry out a case-by-case review of, and submit his proposals on the functioning of, the integrated centres on a priority basis, in full consultation with the host Governments, and to submit a report to the Committee

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on Information at its twenty-second session. The present report was prepared in response to that request.

II. Survey questionnaire to host Governments of fourteen integrated centres

5. The Governments of 14 Member States hosting integrated information centres were asked to express their views on the functioning of the following centres in their respective capitals: Algiers, Ankara, Antananarivo, Asunción, Bucharest, Cairo, Colombo, Kathmandu, Kinshasa, La Paz, Lomé, Maseru, Panama City and Yangon. A four-point questionnaire was sent to the permanent missions of Member States concerned, accompanied by a joint letter, dated 5 October 1999, from both the head of the Department of Public Information and of UNDP.

6. The Governments were asked to rate the performance of the integrated centre which they hosted, with particular emphasis on whether the following objectives of the integration mandate had been achieved: (a) promoting a more unified image of the United Nations; and (b) enhancing information activities in all mandated areas of the Organization's work, including development issues. Additionally, host Governments were invited to comment and make suggestions on any aspect of the integration experience and to provide specific proposals to improve the functioning of the integrated information centres.

7. By mid-January 2000, seven completed questionnaires had been received. The overall performance of the integrated centres is highly regarded by five survey respondents, one Government's response stood at the middle of the rating scale throughout the questionnaire and one gave ratings favouring the negative side of the scale.

8. All respondents were of the opinion that the integrated centres have promoted a more unified image of the United Nations. Most Governments were satisfied with the efforts of the integrated centres in enhancing information dissemination and undertaking proactive information initiatives in their respective countries. The services provided by the centres' reference libraries to local audiences, such as journalists, non-governmental organizations, researchers and students, were highly praised and appreciated by most respondents.

9. All respondents except one provided comments and a few offered suggestions for improving the overall functioning of the respective integrated centres. Some of the suggestions related to the need to provide the integrated centres with more resources, in particular staff specializing in the fields of public information and communications. Other suggestions referred to the need to strengthen the integrated centres' support to depositary libraries, as well as their relationship with public and private educational institutions throughout the host countries. Of the two Governments that had observed a decline in the performance of the information centres in their countries, one felt that it was caused by the financial crisis of the United Nations, while the other Government clearly attributed the decline to the integration exercise.

III. Efforts to enhance the performance of integrated centres

10. The survey indicated that the host Governments responding to the questionnaire hold a generally favourable view of the performance of the integrated centres. In the meantime, the Department of Public Information, in cooperation with UNDP, has launched several initiatives to improve overall cooperation and to enhance the performance of the integrated centres.

11. A Department of Public Information/UNDP working group has been meeting regularly with a view to strengthening the partnership and addressing specific issues. In addition, the Department is now represented on the Inter-Agency Advisory Panel, which reviews candidates for Resident Coordinator posts and has access to the annual reports by Resident Coordinators.

12. The Department and UNDP have jointly formulated terms of reference for a review mission to visit a limited but representative number of integrated centres to evaluate the performance of integrated centres and assist in resolving any outstanding issues.

13. As requested by the General Assembly, they have also drafted a set of guidelines indicating the operational framework for the integrated centres.[4] All Directors of integrated centres have furthermore been asked to provide comments on the integration exercise and suggestions with regard to the functioning of the integrated centres. A preliminary review of their responses indicates that additional staffing, financing

and training opportunities will help meet enhanced information targets and goals.

14. While taking into account the limited resources available, the Department is giving high priority to training, both of centre Directors and of local staff. In September 1999, the Department organized a briefing programme for National Information Officers, followed by a training workshop for Reference Assistants from selected centres held in December. In March of this year, centre Directors, including those UNDP Resident Representatives who concurrently serve as centre Directors, have been invited to participate in a briefing programme at Headquarters.

IV. Conclusion

15. Although the integration exercise has not fully achieved its objectives in all locations, its basic principles, which were partly necessitated by a change in resource levels, remain valid. Taking into account a number of factors, including the achieved strengthening of cooperation between the Department of Public Information and UNDP, the recognition that country-level communication in support of the United Nations system as a whole is one of the principal functions of the United Nations Resident Coordinators and the increased support to and training of the staff of the integrated centres, I remain confident that these offices will meet their public information goals and the expectations of their host countries. In this connection, the Department of Public Information and UNDP will continue to work together to enhance the overall effectiveness of the integrated United Nations information centres.

Notes

[1] A/AC.198/1994/5, para. 20.

[2] A/AC.198/1997/CRP.1, para. 131.

[3] A/AC.198/1999/3, para. 8.

[4] See A/AC.198/2000/4.